DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 127 655 CS 501 481

AUTHOR Doolittle, John
TITLE Violence and the Ratings: A Comparison for 1975's "Second Season."
PUB DATE 76
NOTE 16p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the International Communication Association (Portland, Oregon, April 1976)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Commercial Television; High School Students; Interest Research; *Programing (Broadcast); Public Opinion; Secondary Education; Television Research; *Television Viewing; *Violence
IDENTIFIERS *Audience Ratings

ABSTRACT

Violence ratings for 49 second season (January to April) 1975 prime-time network programs were obtained from 48 high school juniors and seniors. Audience ratings for the same shows were obtained from the Nielsen ratings. No relationship was found between ratings of violence levels and average audience ratings. Violent shows tended to be longer than nonviolent shows, however, and longer shows tended to have poorer audience ratings. Given that the violent program has to compete with similar programs and keep its audience for longer times, this type of programing may be performing relatively well in the ratings. (Author/AA)

****
* Documents acquired by ERIC include many informal unpublished *
* materials not available from other sources. ERIC makes every effort *
* to obtain the best copy available. Nevertheless, items of marginal *
* reproducibility are often encountered and this affects the quality *
* of the microfiche and hardcopy reproductions ERIC makes available *
* via the ERIC Document Reproduction Service (EDRS). EDRS is not *
* responsible for the quality of the original document. Reproductions *
* supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made from the original. *
****

ED127655

U S DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

VIOLENCE AND THE RATINGS:

A COMPARISON FOR 1975's "SECOND SEASON"

John Doolittle

Department of Communication Arts
University of Wisconsin--Madison

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS COPYRIGHTED MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

John Doolittle

TO ERIC AND ORGANIZATIONS OPERATING UNDER AGREEMENTS WITH THE NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION. FURTHER REPRODUCTION OUTSIDE THE ERIC SYSTEM REQUIRES PERMISSION OF THE COPYRIGHT OWNER."

Paper Submitted to the Mass Media Division of
the International Communication Association Convention

April, 1976, Portland, Oregon

CS 501 481

ABSTRACT

One of the major reasons networks give for allowing their television programs to be as violent as they are is that is what the people want. The implication is that viewers enjoy the steady stream of killings, stabbings, and rapes shown during the typical evening. Findings from a recent study offer evidence contrary to the notion that violence is popular. The top-ten rated television shows were not those judged highest in violence. Somewhat opposite results are contained in an earlier study dealing with this issue. Here the evidence shows a slight positive relationship between the overall level of violence in television programs and audience ratings over a 13-year period.

This study attempts to resolve these discrepancies by analyzing the Second Season (January to April), 1975 prime time network programs on both variables. Violence ratings were obtained from students in a Madison public high school. Audience ratings were taken from A.C. Nielsen Company. Forty-nine programs were included in the analysis.

No relationship was found between the programs' violence level and average rating. Although the ratio of violent to nonviolent programs is about equal, the number of half-hour segments is not. Violent shows run longer than nonviolent and, based on data from the Second Season, 1975, the longer a show runs the more likely it will have poorer audience ratings. So given that the violent program has to compete with similar programs and keep audience during longer time frames, this type of programming may be performing relatively well in the ratings.

The issue of violence on television has long contributed to strained relations among broadcasters and various Congressmen, governmental agencies, and segments of the viewing public. A 1971 study for the U.S. Surgeon General amassed a substantial body of evidence in support of the proposition that televised violence heightens the probability of aggression and thus anti-social behavior.

The public is increasingly being made aware of how television, in general, and violence, in particular, may be influencing their lives. Concerned parents are advised to exert some control over the amount and type of television their children view. Several consumer groups have successfully convinced broadcasters to change their program offerings so as to reduce the amount of violence broadcast. Broadcasters have instituted the so-called "family viewing plan" designed to make early evening programs more suitable for young viewers.

Despite this new awareness and these measures to sanitize programs, the network prime time evening hours continue to contain a high level of violent program material. One reason for this is that the governmental agency primarily responsible for broadcasting in the United States, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC), is prohibited from censoring program content. The FCC can encourage, and even force, broadcasters to provide balanced programming, the Congress has prohibited the broadcast of cigarette advertising, and the U.S. Code contains statutes against the broadcast of obscenity, but nothing can prevent a station from airing violence except his/her own conscience.

Since the 1950's, spokesmen for the broadcast industry have made excuses

for the high level of violence on the air by citing the lack of conclusive evidence showing violence to be harmful. Coupled with this is the industry's argument that parents and teachers exert a more powerful influence over youth and are primarily responsible for children anyway. Furthermore, broadcasters maintain they are merely providing entertainment which is most likely to be well received by the majority of the nation's viewers. Thus, the reasoning goes if a type of program is on the air, it is popular with most Americans.

Audience ratings allow broadcasters to keep broad surveillance on how successful programs are. When network programers do their jobs properly, only the most highly rated shows remain on the schedules. By this line of reasoning killings, rape, etc. flourish on the home screen only because that is what the viewers want. Any alteration of the present system deprives broadcasters of their freedoms and the average American viewer of his/her major source of in-home entertainment. One network chieftain aptly presented the broadcaster's point of view when he said, "the public interest is what the public is interested in."

The implication of violence being popular was challenged in a recent magazine article on the subject addressed to parents (Kagan, 1975). During the fall of 1974 Kagan asked newspaper and magazine television critics to rate ("very violent," "violent," "neutral," or "nonviolent") the current roster of prime time programs according to violence level. The resulting list was then compared with the latest available audience ratings for the same programs (A.C. Nielsen report, September 9 through November 10, 1974).

The results, presented in Table 1, were that none of the top ten rated shows appeared on the list of the ten programs judged as being most violent by the critics.

TABLE 1

1974 KAGAN STUDY COMPARING PROGRAM VIOLENCE AND POPULARITY

TV Critics Choice of Most Violent Programs	Ten Highest Rated Network TV Shows (A.C. Nielsen, Sept. 9 through Nov. 10, 1974)
HAWAII FIVE-O	ALL IN THE FAMILY
MANNIX	SANFORD AND SON
CANNON	CHICO AND THE MAN
KOJAK	RHODA
POLICE WOMAN	THE WALTONS
POLICE STORY	M*A*S*H
STREETS OF SAN FRANSISCO	GOOD TIMES
THE ROOKIES	MAUDE
GET CHRISTIE LOVE	WORLD OF DISNEY
KUNG FU	LITTLE HOUSE ON THE PRAIRIE

This lack of relationship between violence in programs and audience popularity is at odds with findings from an earlier study included in the Surgeon General's Report on television. Clark and Blankenburg (1971) analyzed trends of television violence over several years and found that when a season's overall level of violence is high the ratings are likely to be high, too. In that study, violence levels are coded from synopses from television listings for prime time network programs during the 1952 through 1969 seasons. The product-moment correlation between a season's percentage of violent programs and average audience ratings was $r=.534$, $p<.025$. This does not say, however, that an individual program was necessarily high or low in both violence and audience appeal. It may be that highly violent programs were by chance scheduled during successful seasons and other program types contributed more to the high ratings.

In an effort to resolve this question, Clark and Blankenburg broke a season's programs into content types and subdivided these classifications into "high," "mixed," and "low violent" groupings. The average rating for the high

violence group was 18.4 compared with 18.2 for the low. This offers scant support for the notion that violence begets higher ratings.

Concerning the number of violent programs offered during any one season, the authors found this variable had no relationship to the ratings for those same programs ($r=-.19$). But when the frequency of violent shows was lagged one year behind the season's average rating, the two were shown to have a significant relationship ($r=.494$, $p < .05$).

Apparently a successful violent series spurs the scheduling of similar shows during the ensuing season. With a resulting increase in number of violent programs to choose from, the audience is dispersed among the various shows. This may explain the lower ratings for these violent shows.

Since the number of violent series was found to vary considerably over the years (from a high of 54 in 1959 to 12 in 1963) Clark and Blankenburg conclude that violence is a program ingredient used by networks to entice audiences. Program chieftains would use more violence were it not for pressures from government, the audience, and advertisers, plus industry self controls and fragmentation.

It is still not clear whether viewers want violence in their programs. The Kagan study says no, at least at the highest levels of popularity. Clark and Blankenburg indicate that violence and ratings go hand in hand overall and that violent programs do slightly better than nonviolent types.

In an effort to better understand the relationship between violence and audience preferences a study was made of individual network series scheduled between January and April, 1975, a period commonly referred to as the "Second Season." Violence ratings for the series were obtained from 48 juniors and seniors recruited from communication classes at a Madison, Wisconsin, public high school. A seven-point scale was used to rate each series. Audience

figures were obtained from A.C. Nielsen's listing of averages for the January 12 through April 6, 1975, rating period.

Forty-nine individual prime time series were analyzed. Excluded from the study were specials, movie series, and nine series which had not as yet been aired in Madison or were inadvertently omitted.

The seven-point violence scale was converted into three categories: high, moderate, and low violence. (The programs and their respective Nielsen ratings, rankings, plus violence ratings and rankings are presented in the Appendices.)

No relationship was found between violence levels on the seven-point scale and audience ratings for the 49 series examined in the study (Pearson product moment correlation, -.19, n.s.). Nor was a relationship found between the rankings of the series violence level and overall popularity (Spearman rank order correlation, -.14, n.s.).

Of the 49 shows, 17 were judged high in violence, 17 moderately violent, and 15 low violent. Table 2 shows the average ratings and rankings (from 1 to 70) for the three violence categories. The high violence shows have lower average ratings than the moderate and low violence programs. Comparing the rankings of these groupings, the lower violence shows definitely come out on top. These figures strongly suggest that violence is not a magic ingredient for building a successful series. In fact, the opposite may be true.

TABLE 2

AVERAGE AUDIENCE RATINGS AND RANKINGS FOR SERIES VIOLENCE CATEGORIES

	(N= 49)	Nielsen Average Rating	Nielsen Average Ranking (1-70)*
High Violence	(17)	18.9	37
Moderate Violence	(17)	21.1	31
Low Violence	(15)	21.1	27

*Ranking is a numerical ordering of programs based on ratings beginning with the highest rated shows.

Before accepting this notion, let us consider Clark and Blankenburg's thesis that the violent shows nullify each other in the ratings. This could occur in two ways. First, a higher overall number of violent than nonviolent shows could be offered and/or second, the scheduling of violent shows against one another would dilute the potential audience.

The 49 shows in this study are fairly evenly distributed among the three levels of violence. The two series edge the high category has over the low group is not great enough to arouse concern over saturation--that is, until we examine the length of the individual series while controlling for level of violence.

TABLE 3

VIOLENCE CATEGORY BY LENGTH OF PROGRAM

Program Length	(N= 49)	High Violence	Moderate Violence	Low Violence
60 Min.	(31)	16	8	7
30 Min.	(18)	1	9	8

High violence series account for 52 percent of the hour-long series and almost none of the 30-minute shows. It is likely that a rating is easier to maintain during 30-minutes than an hour, especially since most of the ratings are compiled from quarter-hour surveys. During a longer period the audience

can be drawn away by other programs or competing activities. Attention perhaps is easier to maintain in 30-minute chunks. These factors may be contributing to the rating differences for varying lengths of series included in this study as shown in Table 4.

TABLE 4

MEAN RATINGS BY LENGTH OF SERIES*

	(N= 62) 30 Minutes (16)	60 Minutes (36)	Movies---120 Minutes (10)
Mean Rating	22.1	19.4	18.3

*Movie series are included in Table 4 because they demonstrate the relationship between program length and ratings.

If 30-minute shows are more popular, why don't networks stay with the shorter time periods and reap the benefits? Longer programs appeal to networks because they fill time that might have been given to a poorer rated show. One reasonably high rated program running 60 minutes is better than two possible duds, so the thinking goes. Also, the hour production does not cost double the price of a 30-minute program, so there are financial reasons. Therefore, even though a longer show is likely to turn in a lower rating, it may be worth the price.

Drama--probably violent--usually is selected to fill the 60-minute segments because it is more adaptable to a longer time frame than comedy. An hour-long situation comedy would be hard to sustain on a weekly basis, but violent themes can be padded with dramatic intrigue and action. This does not mean that violence cannot be played within 30 minutes. In the early days of television most programs were that length.

Table 5 demonstrates how high-violence shows are competing with one another to a greater degree than low-violence types. In all but two of the half-hour time slots where they both appear, high outnumbers low.

TABLE 5

FREQUENCY OF VIOLENT PROGRAM TYPES DURING PRIME TIME HOURS

Level of Violence	(n= 83)*	7:30	8:00	8:30	9:00	9:30	10:00	10:30
High	(33)	0	5	5	5	5	7	6
Moderate	(27)	0	7	4	5	3	4	4
Low	(23)	2	10	5	1	3	1	1

*This N is larger than the number of individual programs in the study because shows lasting 60 minutes or more were counted separately for every half hour in which they appeared on the schedule.

As to the clustering of program types, violent programs are fairly evenly distributed across the schedule. There are just more of them running each half hour than nonviolent types.

A highly violent show might have a better chance of beating the competition if it does not have to compete with similar shows. In fact, the three series rated by the Madison sample as having the highest level of violence (MANNIX, HAWAII FIVE-O, and KOJAK) have an average audience rating of 22.2. This is a little better than the three programs at the bottom of the violence list (MARY TYLER MOORE, BOB NEWHART, and HAPPY DAYS) which have a mean rating of 21.2.

Summary and Conclusions

Ratings continue to spell success or failure for television series. If a series does not deliver its expected share of the audience it will not last beyond an initial run. Comedy, especially situation comedies with familiar faces, has provided networks with a successful program formula. These shows regularly find their way among the top-rated series. In fact, maybe there is something anachronistic about poorly rated comedies. They might have to be swept off the schedules before they languish. Perhaps violent series are not as fragile. They contain an inherent force which could help to keep their momentum up—conflict. The key chase, murder, or stabbing of a typical

episode does not depend solely on the immediate culture or a leading character to move its audience, but rather speaks a timeless language of human drama.

In this study no relationship was found to exist between the level of a series violence and its rating. This does not mean that people dislike violence on television, but that violence is not the key factor to be considered in explaining a program s popularity.

In January, 1975, the sheer number of highly violent offerings during any prime time half hour was greater than for less violent types. This is true even though the absolute number of programs was about equal for the three violent groups. Thus, as earlier research suggests, the violent shows are in competition with one another for the same potential audiences. In addition, violent shows are more likely to be lengthier than less violent ones, and the longer a show runs the lower its rating is likely to be.

Although the top-ten list may not look very violent, it takes more than ten shows to program a single network's week of time slots. The hour-long violent dramas may not be the front runners in the networks' stable but they do a lot of the necessary backup work.

More research is needed to determine audience reactions and preferences regarding violence and other program material. Even if violence is what the typical viewer chooses to watch, this does not necessarily mean that some other brand of entertainment will not be equally or possibly more appealing. A larger issue still remains. Is it wise to indulge the desires of the mass audience with programming that may be having negative social effects for society?

Clark, D.G., and Blankenburg, W.B. Trends in Violent Content in Selected Mass Media. In G.A. Comstock and E.A. Rubinstein (Eds.), Television and Social Behavior. Vol. I. Content and Control. Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1972.

Kagan, J. "TV Violence: The Worst Offenders." McCalls, March 1975, pp. 51-52.

Surgeon General's Report. Television and Social Behavior: A Technical Report to the Surgeon General's Scientific Advisory Committee on Television and Social Behavior. Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1972, Vols. I-V.

APPENDIX A

VIOLENCE INDICES FOR JANUARY, 1975, NETWORK TELEVISION SERIES
BASED ON DATA FROM MADISON SAMPLE

Series (N= 49)	Violence Category	Violence Rating (1-7)	Violence Ranking
MANNIX	High	7	1
HAWAII FIVE-O	High	7	2
KOLCHAK	High	7	3
MANHUNTER	High	6	4
KUNG FU	High	6	5
STREETS OF SAN FRANCISCO	High	6	6
POLICE STORY	High	6	7
BARETTA	High	6	8
KOJAK	High	6	9
GET CHRISTIE LOVE	High	6	10
CANNON	High	6	11
KHAN	High	6	12
BARNABY JONES	High	6	13
GUNSMOKE	High	5	14
HARRY O	High	5	15
ADAM-12	High	5	16
ROCKFORD FILES	High	5	17
EMERGENCY	Moderate	4	18
PETROCELLI	Moderate	4	19
M*A*S*H	Moderate	4	20
ALL IN THE FAMILY	Moderate	4	21
CARIBE	Moderate	4	22
MEDICAL CENTER	Moderate	4	23
SWAT	Moderate	4	24

Series (N= 49)	Violence Category	Violence Rating (1-7)	Violence Ranking
MAUDE	Moderate	4	25
ARCHER	Moderate	4	26
BARNEY MILLER	Moderate	3	27
HOT L BALTIMORE	Moderate	3	28
CHICO AND THE MAN	Moderate	3	29
JEFFERSONS	Moderate	3	30
MARCUS WELBY, M.D.	Moderate	3	31
SANFORD AND SON	Moderate	3	32
LUCAS TANNER	Moderate	3	33
ODD COUPLE	Moderate	3	34
THAT'S MY MAMA	Low	2	35
WORLD OF DISNEY	Low	2	36
SMOTHERS BROTHERS	Low	2	37
GOOD TIMES	Low	2	38
LITTLE HOUSE ON PRAIRIE	Low	2	39
KAREN	Low	2	40
CAROL BURNETT	Low	2	41
CHER	Low	2	42
WALTONS	Low	2	43
TONY ORLANDO AND DAWN	Low	2	44
RHODA	Low	2	45
MAC DAVIS	Low	2	46
HAPPY DAYS	Low	2	47
BOB NEWHART	Low	1	48
MARY TYLER MOORE	Low	1	49

APPENDIX B

NATIONAL AUDIENCE FIGURES FOR JANUARY, 1975, NETWORK TELEVISION SERIES REPORTED BY A.C. NIELSEN FOR JANUARY 12 THROUGH APRIL 6, 1975

Series (N= 49)	Average Rating	Average Ranking (1-70)*
ALL IN THE FAMILY	30.4	1
SANFORD AND SON	30.2	2
CHICO AND THE MAN	29.0	3
M*A*S*H	28.8	4
JEFFERSONS	27.4	5
GOOD TIMES	27.3	6
WALTONS	26.0	7
HAWAII FIVE-O	25.8	8
RHODA	25.1	9
ROCKFORD FILES	24.9	10
MAUDE	24.5	12
KOJAK	24.2	13
MARY TYLER MOORE	24.1	14
CANNON	24.0	15
LITTLE HOUSE ON PRAIRIE	23.2	16
MANNIX	23.2	16
STREETS OF SAN FRANCISCO	22.2	18
BOB NEWHART	21.9	19
SWAT	21.8	20
TONY ORLANDO AND DAWN	21.5	22
CHER	21.4	23
GUNSMOKE	21.0	25
CAROL BURNETT	20.4	28
BARNABY JONES	20.4	29

Series (N= 49)	Average Rating	Average Ranking (1-70)*
MEDICAL CENTER	19.8	30
WORLD OF DISNEY	19.5	31
POLICE STORY	19.3	32
EMERGENCY	18.9	33
PETROCELLI	18.9	33
HARRY O	18.5	38
SMOTHERS BROTHERS	18.3	40
MAC DAVIS	18.1	41
CARIBE	17.9	42
THAT'S MY MAMA	17.9	42
HAPPY DAYS	17.8	44
LUCAS TANNER	17.4	47
MANHUNTER	16.9	51
MARCUS WELBY, M.D.	16.7	53
ADAM-12	16.2	54
ARCHER	15.1	58
HOT L BALTIMORE	14.9	60
BARETTA	14.4	61
BARNEY MILLER	14.3	62
KAREN	14.1	64
GET CHRISTIE LOVE	13.9	65
KOJAK	13.7	66
ODD COUPLE	13.4	67
KAHN	11.1	69
KUNG FU	8.4	70

*Rankings are not continuous (1-70) due to the exclusion of movie series and specials from the analysis.